Some Mother's Son

Produced by Jim Sheridan, Arthur Lappin and Ed Burke; directed by Terry George; screenplay by Terry George and Jim Sheridan; cinematography by Geoff Simpson; production design by David Wilson; edited by Craig McKay; music by Bill Whelan; starring Helen Mirren, Fionnula Flanagan, Aidan Gillen, David O'Hara, John Lynch, Tim Woodward, Tom Hollander, Ciaran Hinds and Gerald McSorley. Color, 112 mins. A Columbia Pictures release.

Kathleen Quigley (Helen Mirren) can't talk her son Gerard (Aidan Gillen) out of going on a hunger strike to win political status for IRA prisoners in Terry George's *Some Mother's Son*.

In a particularly bizarre opening sequence, the Hollywood film *Blown Away* (1994) shows a republican prisoner, played with hammy zeal by a miscast Tommy Lee Jones, ruthlessly murdering his cellmate and then blowing himself out of a Northern Ireland prison (itself conceived with such gothic flamboyance that it would not have looked out of place in a Universal horror film of the Thirties). Despite its patent absurdity, and lazy recycling of stereotypes of Irish psychopathy, the film appears, nonetheless, to have attracted relatively little adverse critical comment.

By way of contrast, *Some Mother's Son*, a work of some seriousness dealing with the 1981 hunger strike by Irish republican prisoners in Long Kesh (or the Maze), has been met, especially in Britain but also elsewhere, with a high degree of hostility. Director and cowriter Terry George is, of course, no stranger to controversy. *In the Name of the Father* (1993), which he also cowrote with Jim Sheridan, attracted, if anything, even more flak for the way it tampered with known 'facts' in its retelling of the story of the falsely imprisoned Guildford Four. Some of this criticism undoubtedly took its toll and there is some evidence that, in *Some Mother's Son*, George has sought to preempt similar complaints.

Somewhat paradoxically, this means that the film has both taken less liberty with actual events than its predecessor while being more open about its strategy of fictional selection and reconstruction. With the exception of Bobby Sands, characters have been given fictional names and are intended to be viewed as 'composites' of actual people. It is therefore impossible simply to equate characters such as the Sinn Fein leader, Danny Boyle (Ciaran Hinds), or the hunger striker taken off the strike by his mother, Gerard Quigley (Aidan Gillen), with real-life counterparts such as Gerry Adams or Paddy Quinn. It also makes it more difficult for critics to level charges of 'inaccuracy' at the film, given that these characterizations are so clearly 'fictitious' constructs.

As a result, a main line of criticism directed at the film has been less its historical inaccuracy than its alleged prorepublican viewpoint. In this respect, the film has been a victim, along with other recent films such as *Michael Collins* and *The Devil's Own*, of the virtual halting of the Northern Ireland peace process, and the 1996 breakdown of the IRA ceasefire, which has meant that these films have been opening in a much more politically tense climate than was initially anticipated. It is also clear that *Some Mother's Son* has provoked quite contrary responses. Thus, while Alexander Walker, the film critic of the *London Evening Standard*, has, somewhat predictably, denounced the film as "the latest, most overt Irish-made film adopting a Sinn Fein-IRA agenda," the critic of the *The Observer*, Philip French, has argued that "Sinn Fein and the IRA" are, in fact, "shown as manipulative, deceitful, posturing and cruel." While many critics have simply seen what they have looked for, the widely divergent reactions which *Some Mother's Son* has evoked have also derived from its strategy in dealing with the history of the hunger strike.

The film is not so much about the hunger strikers themselves as it is the reactions of those around them, especially the mothers. Just as *In the Name of the Father* revolved around family relationships (that between father and son in particular), so *Some Mother's Son* focuses on the story of two mothers, Kathleen Quigley (Helen Mirren) and Annie Higgins (Fionnula Flanagan), and their relationship with their respective sons. In this way, the film becomes much less concerned with showing the prisoners' struggle for effective political status (and their undoubted courage and determination) than exploring the position of the mothers as they respond to their sons' activities (their involvement in the IRA and their participation in the hunger strike). The film works, in this regard, as a kind of maternal melodrama in which we are invited to empathize with the mothers as they experience a series of unsettling predicaments. Indeed, a central convention of the maternal melodrama is that the heroine should be faced with an 'impossible' or heartbreaking choice. In *Some Mother's Son*, this becomes the almost unbearable one of having to choose between letting your son live or die (given the right of parents to have their sons fed once they have lost consciousness).

In laying out this choice, the film sets up a contrast between two types of mother. Kathleen is middle class and moderate, opposed to violence, and shocked to learn of her son's involvement in the IRA. Annie, on the other hand, comes from a traditional rural republican family. One son has been killed by the British and, before his capture, her other son Frank (David O'Hara) is something of a 'legend' with a reputation for bravado. Despite their very different backgrounds and perspectives, the two women nonetheless forge an alliance, born out of their common situation. While the film makes much of their shared experience as mothers, their choices at the end of the film are very different, and the responses which the film mobilizes are thus quite complex.

Near the end of the film, a distraught Kathleen discovers that the deal which she thought would end the strike, and so save her son's life, is not going to be implemented. At this point, Kathleen steps back from the camera and a series of slow-motion, point-of-view shots reveal the men in the room (Danny Boyle, Father Daly, and the prisoners' leader) engaged in angry recrimination, while a number of women—or "ghosts," as George describes them—are seen weeping. It is a key scene and highlights Kathleen's perception of the failure of the men to agree upon a settlement and the shared suffering of the women across the sectarian divide. In this respect, *Some Mother's Son* belongs to a longstanding tradition—evident in the work of Sean O'Casey, for example—of contrasting the 'humanity' and 'commonsense' of women to the

unyielding and destructive fanaticism of men. Indeed, Terry George himself has argued that it is Kathleen Quigley, the woman who is "apolitical and a humanist," who is the film's "central focus."

Nevertheless, the film also shows Kathleen's growing political awareness and involvement (leading her, for example, to campaign for the election of Bobby Sands) and, thus, to a certain extent, the abandonment of her previous 'apolitical' stance. Her decision to take her son off the strike is thus not simply a 'humanist' protest against male obstinacy but also, at least in part, a 'political' judgment about the continuing effectiveness of the strike as a political weapon. Moreover, by having Annie decide differently from Kathleen, the film also renders problematic the community of women—united in grief and estranged from male political maneuvering—suggested in the earlier scene.

In perhaps the film's most moving scene, Kathleen encounters Annie and her daughter Theresa in a prison corridor where she learns that Annie's son, Frank, has just died. She tells Annie that she took her own son, Gerard, off the strike ("I had to do it") and an exchange of looks follows. But Annie, the committed republican, does not reprimand Kathleen for breaking ranks with the other families ("You're lucky you had the choice") and Kathleen does not suggest that Annie should have acted differently. The film thus shows both mothers to have made understandable—if unbearably difficult—decisions. As a result, the scene is not only invested with a heightened sense of poignancy but also a degree of ambivalence towards any simple 'humanist' solution the film might otherwise suggest.

It is this deeply moving aspect of *Some Mother's Son* which has added to some of the hostility directed at it. For, alongside the attacks on its political 'bias' and factual 'inaccuracy,' have been complaints, traditionally directed by male critics at melodramas, that the film is overly sentimental and emotional. In a sense, these are irrelevant criticisms because George's cinema is unashamedly addressed to the emotions. He wishes to make films which reach large audiences and is happy to belong to what he calls "the sledgehammer school of filmmaking."

Nevertheless, there is a certain price to be paid for such an approach. The great strength of a film like *Some Mother's Son* is its capacity to involve and move audiences and remind them of events which might otherwise be forgotten. On the other hand, it is therefore better at provoking an emotional response than at explaining the complexity of events or encouraging a genuine political understanding. As John McGarry and Brendan O'Leary (in *Explaining Northern Ireland*) have suggested, albeit a little coldly, "The whole saga of the hunger strikes can be seen as a rational short-term... manoeuvre in a long-term political war of position." In this sense, the emphasis upon the women's reactions to the hunger strike, and the privileging of the 'human' response, works against a clear identification of the political stakes involved on both sides. Thus, in the case of the prisoners, there is very little which explains the background to their actions or even makes particularly clear their five demands, while the complex relationship of the prisoners to the Sinn Fein leadership and the IRA (who advised against the hunger strike) are largely skipped over.

Moreover, just as the prisoners, because of their incarceration, failed fully to grasp the character of the opposition—in the form of a newly-elected Conservative government under Margaret Thatcher—which they faced, so the film itself is vague in its portrayal of the factors underpinning the British government's 'war of position.' This can be seen most clearly in the film's treatment of the British politician Farnsworth (Tim Woodward). Although criticized by some as a caricature, this seems less relevant than the way in which the dramatic logic of the film forces him into the role of an omnipotent presence, persistently forcing the pace of events and manipulating the prisoners' responses. Thus, he is seen in the 'war room' explaining the government's new strategy of "isolation, criminalization, and demoralization"; in the prison when Frank and Gerard arrive and when the dirty protest is initiated; at the Houses of Parliament when the two women go to visit MPs; in conversation with a government minister discussing tactics; and then in pursuit of the Foreign Office representative, Harrington, after he has negotiated a deal with the Sinn Fein leader.

The net result of this is both to simplify—and personalize—the range of political forces arrayed against the prisoners and to invest events with the character of conscious conspiracy (a perspective which is reinforced by the appearance of the unnamed government minister who reassures his junior that "We have every confidence in you"). The point, of course, is not that there weren't devious political machinations behind the scenes but that the conspiratorial activities of an odious young Thatcherite can hardly be said to account for the economic and political shifts which were a characteristic of the early Thatcher years and which underpinned the government's strategy in relation to the prisoners.

This relative absence of a formed political perspective in George's film has further consequences. Writing on film and history (in *Visions of the Past*), Robert Rosenstone suggests that "the best historical films" will "show not just what happened but how what happens means to us" and "interrogate the past for the sake of the present." Although George has argued that his film is "not history as such," there is no doubt that his 'cinematic history' of the 1981 hunger strike will put into circulation a set of meanings for the present. Indeed, some of the animosity which has been directed towards the film stems from the memory of the extreme polarization of Northern Ireland society to which the hunger strikes contributed and the worry that the recollection of such events will open up old wounds.

In retrospect, the major legacy of the hunger strikes may be regarded as political. The election of Bobby Sands to the British Parliament nudged the republican movement towards electoral politics and a growing involvement in the political process which ultimately led to the 1994 IRA ceasefire. Although the film charts the beginning of this political shift within republicanism, the emphasis upon the pain of the mothers (in the face of male 'righteousness') in a sense undervalues the significance of this development. Moreover, by making the mothers the moral center of the drama, the film rather too easily dissolves the very real divisions which characterize contemporary Irish politics. Most significantly, despite the appearance of the widow of a murdered prison officer in the 'ghosts' scene, the film offers no actual evidence of women from the nationalist and loyalist communities (in reality so far apart) perceiving of themselves as a community or on what political basis this might be a likelihood.

Some Mother's Son speaks from the experiences of the nationalist community and remembers the traumatic events of the hunger strikes. It is also a genuinely moving film which few could watch with equanimity. At the same time, it is arguably too much a film of remembrance and pathos, one which has avoided making the past fully resonate for the present by rather too readily sidestepping the difficult challenges presented by the current political situation.—**John Hill**

Rosewood

Produced by Jon Peters; directed by John Singleton; screenplay by Gregory Poirier; cinematography by Johnny E. Jensen; production design by Paul Sylbert; edited by Bruce Cannon; costume design by Ruth Carter; music by John Williams; starring Jon Voight, Ving Rhames, Don Cheadle, Bruce McGill, Esther Rolle, Michael Rooker, Elise Neal, Catherine Kellner and Akosua Busia. Color, 142 mins. A Warner Bros. release.

John Singleton's *Rosewood* grapples with a powerful, daunting contradiction. Put simply, how does one make a slick, Hollywood action-adventure-entertainment flick, with big box-office expectations, about one of history's ultimate nightmares: genocidal racism? Singleton is not alone in attempting to negotiate this contradiction, since other mainstream filmmakers have attempted to do so before. Posed as question, this contradiction reverberates with a number of issues, raised most recently by the work of Steven Spielberg in *Schindler's List* (1993), Mario and Melvin Van Peebles in *Panther* (1995),